

**Statement of
The Honorable James L. Oberstar
Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and
Emergency Management
Hearing On
“Moving Mississippi Forward: Ongoing Progress and
Remaining Problems”
June 19, 2008**

I am pleased that the Subcommittee is holding this hearing on the status of the recovery from Hurricane Katrina in Mississippi. First, let me welcome the Members from the Mississippi delegation who will share with us this morning a first-hand account of the challenges which remain in their districts. I look forward to hearing their testimony and the testimony of each of the witnesses.

Hurricane Katrina made landfall on August 29, 2005, and proved to be the costliest natural disaster in American history. The storm had a massive physical impact on the land, affecting 90,000 square miles, which is an area the size of Great Britain. Under the authority granted to the President in the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act, the President declared a Major Disaster in the State of Mississippi on the date the storm made landfall.

Today's hearing will address the status of recovery in Mississippi and examine the challenges that the citizens of Mississippi continue to face nearly three years after the landfall of Hurricane Katrina. I look forward to receiving a status report on housing, the rebuilding of infrastructure in Mississippi, and the efforts to mitigate any damage in future disasters.

While FEMA, and more importantly the citizens of the State of Mississippi, have made great strides, there is still a great deal to be done. While the numbers of families living in trailers provided by FEMA has been significantly reduced, FEMA reports that at the end of last month over 6,000 families were still in trailers.

We will also hear today about the status of the rebuilding of infrastructure in Mississippi's communities under the Public Assistance program and attempts to rebuild better with the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program. As we will hear, these programs are not advancing the recovery as quickly as everyone would like. Over a year ago, this Subcommittee held a hearing to identify the specific issues that were hindering recovery, and we heard from members of the Mississippi delegation about many of these same issues that we will hear today.

As a result of that hearing, this Committee drafted and reported H.R. 3247, the Hurricanes Katrina and Rita Recovery Facilitation Act of 2007, a bill specifically targeted to expedite recovery efforts in Mississippi and Louisiana. This legislation passed the House on October 29, 2007, but has been pending in the Senate for nearly eight months. We urge the other body to pass that bill quickly.

Since Hurricane Katrina, FEMA has faced challenges in assisting in the recovery of state of Mississippi, partly because of the scale of this unprecedented disaster. Another part of FEMA's challenge in response and recovery in the state of Mississippi is its status as an agency within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). FEMA's performance as an agency has suffered since its inclusion in the Department of Homeland Security, as opposed to when FEMA was an independent agency that reported directly to the President of the United States and U.S. Congress. The overwhelming majority – in fact, nearly all -- disasters faced by the United States are natural disasters, not acts of terrorism. Unfortunately, DHS changed the focus of FEMA to an agency primarily focused on terrorism, and shifted away from the all-hazards approach favored by FEMA when it was independent agency.

I would also like to take this opportunity to express this Committee's and our Nation's great concern and heartfelt sympathy with the citizens of the Midwest that are currently facing devastating floods that appears to at least rival the damage of the great floods of 1993. This Committee stands ready to lend its support to ensure that the citizens of affected communities receive all the help they need as they respond to these floods, and will carefully monitor FEMA's efforts as we move from response efforts into recovery.

I commend Chair Norton for holding this hearing and look forward to the testimony.